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HOUSEHOLD CALENDAR

The Inside Story of the Potato

A radio interview between Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, and Morse Salisbury, Radio Service, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, March 18, 1937.

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MR. SALISBURY: Now that the Thursday discussion groups are over, we're back on our schedule of last fall. So until something else comes along to upset our routine, we'll make Thursday the regular day for our home economics feature from the Department of Agriculture. Following out that plan today, here's your friend, Ruth Van Deman. And she gives every appearance of being ready to give you another of her reports from the Bureau of Home Economics. All set, Ruth?

MISS VAN DEMAN: All set, and positively rarin' to go. The 17th of March always stirs up my two-sixteenths, or whatever it is, of Scotch-Irish blood.

MR. SALISBURY: That's a fighting combination, Ruth - the Scotch and the Irish. I know. It doesn't take much to set it off.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Not if you employ the wrong psychology, Morse. Well, yesterday in all the talk about shamrocks and blarney stones, and hearing all those Irish songs, it came over me that in these years on the Farm and Home Hour I don't believe I've ever said very much about that great Irish food - the potato.

MR. SALISBURY: That's right, Ruth, I don't believe you have told the inside story of the potato. By the way, of course you know the Irish potato isn't Irish.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Oh, yes, I know. I believe the potato first grew in South America. Somewhere up on the slopes of the Andes, wasn't it?

MR. SALISBURY: That's right. The Spanish explorers back in 1500 or so were impressed with the potato as they found it in South America, or maybe they thought it was just a curiosity. Anyway they took specimens back to Europe with them to plant at home. And that's the way the potato got its start in Europe.

MISS VAN DEMAN: But people were a little slow in accepting it, I believe. I've heard stories about how Louis the Sixteenth wore potato flowers in his buttonhole and his queen dressed her hair with them in the evening to try to make the potato popular in France. And how Frederick the Great sent out a royal decree and backed it up with soldiers to make his people plant potatoes.

MR. SALISBURY: That checks with my history too. And yet think of German potato pancakes and German potato salad today. Ach der Lieber!

MISS VAN DEMAN: Ja wohl, mein Herr. But even the Scotch and the Irish didn't take to potatoes for awhile. Sir Walter Raleigh's Irish garden-er was said to have made the mistake of thinking the berries on a potato plant were the part to eat, and he complained that the potato wasn't worth space in his garden.

MR. SALISBURY: Complained bitterly, did you say?

MISS VAN DEMAN: No puns allowed, Morse. This is history, very serious agricultural history. But I understand that once the Irish learned their potatoes, they couldn't be separated from them. They called them Irish potatoes and they brought them along when they came to North America. Colonists from the north of Ireland planted them in the rocky soil of New Hampshire and wherever they settled down to make a home.

MR. SALISBURY: And so began potato history over here. I expect that even then people were beginning to choose the plants that produced the best and most tubers to propagate from. And you know, of course Ruth, ever since the Department of Agriculture and the State experiment stations entered the research field, they've been active in potato breeding work. Now they're trying to develop disease-resistant strains.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, it was in connection with some of the potato breeding work of the Bureau of Plant Industry that our nutrition people had a chance to run vitamin A tests on potatoes.

MR. SALISBURY: Vitamin A, did they find potatoes rich in vitamin A?

MISS VAN DEMAN: No, not rich in any sense, but richer than they expected. The potato is white and it's an underground tuber - two things that rule against it as a source of vitamin A. And vitamin A, as you remember, is generally associated with green and yellow in vegetables. But Doctor Munsell, who did these studies, found, all the same, that white potatoes are a fair source even of vitamin A. They contain about 40 Sherman units per 100 grams. If a person eats potatoes regularly, that counts up. They also contain vitamins B and G, and they're a good source of C.

MR. SALISBURY: Do you mean raw or cooked?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Both. Of course some of the vitamin C disappears in the cooking, especially if the potatoes are boiled or fried or otherwise exposed to air and heat at the same time. If they're baked in their jackets, they lose less vitamin C and other food substances than any other way.

MR. SALISBURY: Then if you eat those nice crisp baked potato skins along with the rest, you get everything the potato has to offer.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Absolutely. Much of the iron and other valuable minerals are probably in the layers just underneath the brown skin. Throw that away and you throw away good food value. If you happen to be living on a low-cost diet, potatoes can be a very much needed and a cheap way to get the

iron, which helps ward off anemia.

Going back to the vitamin C in potatoes. Dr. Alfred Hess in his book on "Scurvy - Past and Present" says that in the old days in Ireland and Norway failure of the potato crop used to bring on serious epidemics of scurvy. He believes that even happened in one part of the United States no longer ago than 1916.

Well, we know better now how to fortify ourselves with all the protective foods. With the knowledge we have today, if there should come a time when we couldn't get vitamin C from potatoes, we'd simply turn to grapefruit juice and other rich sources.

And while we're talking about the food value in a potato, just let me scotch one of those rumors about their being such a fattening food.

It's probably hard to realize, but potatoes as you buy them may contain anywhere from 65 to 85 percent of water. And that doesn't change very much even after they are cooked.

Figured out in calories that means only about 325 calories per pound. Or taking it down to a medium-sized baked or boiled potato, it's only about a hundred calories. No more than a small slice of roast beef, or a large apple, or an inch cube of butter.

This craze for slim figures has lead some of us to take mighty big chances with our health. Of course it's sometimes just as dangerous to be too fat as too thin. But there's a golden mean in everything.

MR. SALISBURY: And there's a perfectly good place for the lowly spud in the golden mean of diet.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, absolutely. On the cooking side, our foods people have done some very interesting experiments on potatoes, on potato chips particularly. It was a kind of two-way study of the fats used in frying and the chip-making qualities of the potatoes themselves.

MR. SALISBURY: What did they find?

MISS VAN DEMAN: They found that the vegetable oils, such as peanut, and cottonseed, and corn oil, stand up best and make the best looking, best tasting potato chips. And the same would be true for French fries or lattice potatoes--for any of the forms of potatoes fried in deep fat. These vegetable oils have high smoking points, as the chemists put it, and low congealing points, which give a bloom to the chips.

MR. SALISBURY: And what about the potatoes?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Any variety will make good chips provided the tubers have not been stored in too cold a place just before they're used. Maybe you remember that Mr. Wright and Mr. Peacock reported their experiments along that line.

MR. SALISBURY: Yes. Sure. That work on the effect of storage temperatures on the cooking quality of potatoes. Just what bearing did that have on this potato chip business?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Just this. If the potatoes are stored much below 50 degrees, too much sugar develops and the chips will be dark brown or mottled. I saw some almost black chips down in our laboratory one day from potatoes that had been stored at around 32 degrees.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, Ruth, as a man not on a reducing diet ---

MISS VAN DEMAN: Definitely not.

MR. SALISBURY: Well, then as a man who likes potato chips, I'm very much interested in what you say. Have you got these directions for making potato chips all down in neat form?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, we have a mimeograph on potato chips, I hope it's neat. And Mrs. Whiteman worked out a series of recipes for cooking potatoes.

MR. SALISBURY: Good. If anyone wants this information on making potato chips and cooking potatoes based on the research work of the Bureau of Home Economics, write to Miss Van Deman at the Department of Agriculture, Washington.

And thank you, Ruth, for coming up today. We'll be looking for you next Thursday.